

FISHMERCHANT'S DAUGHTER

YURI KOCHIYAMA

AN ORAL HISTORY

VOL. 2



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Cover photo, 7th Avenue in Harlem, looking north from 126th St., on V-J Day 1945 (courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture).

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In Harlem, around the beginning of the 1960s, we started to see a lot of political people on the nights of our open house, people who had been in the South, fighting for civil rights, people who had seen the Cuban revolution. What they told us opened new doors for us. We weren't involved yet. Mostly we were taking it in: watching the demonstrations on television, and reading about it in the newspapers. But what they said stayed with us.

Then it was 1963. All of a sudden political activities were rampant in New York. Harlem was full of street-corner orators, including Malcolm. Malcolm used the corner on the same side of the street as Micheaux's Liberation Bookstore on 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. The street-corner speakers drew crowds everywhere. If you were like me, you were stirred.

My husband and I got involved with the Harlem Parents Committee and started to hear about demonstrations and picket lines. There was a citywide school boycott. There were daily demonstrations at Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn for construction jobs for blacks and Puerto Ricans. There was a demonstration on the lower East Side at the Rutgers Housing Project and at White Towers in the Bronx.

The Downstate demonstration was, as I remember it, an education for me and my family. All the kids went; the youngest, Tommy, was four, Jimmy was six, Eddie was eight, Lorrie was 11, Audee was 14, and Billy was 16. There was a demonstration earlier, for a traffic light around 133rd Street and Fifth Avenue: children were getting hit by cars. Mothers and children participated and I used to take my two youngest. At Downstate, thousands of people were involved for the entire summer of 1963 and 600 people were arrested, including for the first time me and my oldest son, Billy.

That was a lesson for me in how masses of people can put pressure on people in power and force them to change their policies. The construction companies were forced to hire black and Puerto Rican workers that summer.

In October, when the cases from that summer were being heard in court, I saw Malcolm for the first time. That was a turning point for me. Malcolm had come several times to Downstate during the demonstrations. He didn't participate—he was still under orders from Elijah Muhammed not to get involved with civil rights activities—but he would be there watching. In the foyer of the courtroom, I asked one of the civil rights leaders I knew if he would introduce me. He said just go over and introduce yourself.

Of course, I was a bit afraid to do it, but I went over to where he was talking and stayed a little outside the group; they were all black. He looked over a couple of times and didn't say anything. Finally, I said I just wanted to let him know how much I admired him. I was really at a loss for words; I wasn't sure if he would consider me a person of color. He beckoned me to come forward and I put my hand out to shake hands. He looked very stern, and when I said I didn't know if he would meet with people other than blacks, he said, "Well"—and then he burst into that fantastic smile and put his hands out.

The civil rights movement had just come north and I had just got my feet wet. There were lots of things about the black people's struggle I didn't understand. I told Malcolm: "I admire you, but there were things I disagreed with." Okay, he said, you disagree with me; what about? I disagreed with him about integration; I believed in it. He said we can't in two minutes discuss the pros and cons of integration; come to the Hotel Theresa. That was where his office was; I was awestruck. Then everybody else closed in, wanting to get their say, too, and I backed away, and watched as he shook hands and took in, almost penetratingly, each person's name. I was amazed that he did that because it seemed like he might never see any of these people again.

The following night I heard him on the radio, debating with other black leaders. I thought what he said was so illuminating and forceful, and that he was so unmitigating in his stance, that I sat down at the typewriter and wrote him a letter about the discussion, and about meeting him,

and hoping that there might really be the time one day when I could go to his office to discuss some things. Then every day for weeks, I looked in the mail for an answer.

The months went on. Kennedy was killed in November of that year, and Malcolm made the statement about the chickens coming home to roost, which so offended or disturbed Muhammed that he had Malcolm muzzled. Then Malcolm announced he was going to lead his own group; he wanted to become more involved in the civil rights movement. He wanted to have the freedom to move around.

That January, in 1964, I got a call from the Hiroshima-Nagasaki World Peace Study Mission to help set up meetings with civil rights leaders in Harlem. The buildup of nuclear arms was increasing sharply and these Hiroshima-Nagasaki victims wanted to tell the world why it was necessary to stop. It was really a tour for nuclear disarmament. The Japanese wanted to visit Harlem and writers from that group wanted to meet Dick Gregory, James Baldwin, and Malcolm. Everybody wanted to meet Malcolm, if the truth were known, but he was so controversial that most groups kept their support quiet.

Even though Malcolm didn't answer my letter, I wrote to him about meeting with the atom-bombed Japanese writers. About a week before the reception, Baldwin cancelled and said his sister would come instead, and Gregory begged off (although he later went to the Soviet Union with this group). By June 6th, the day of the reception, we still hadn't heard from Malcolm.

We took the Japanese on a tour of Harlem schools and churches. They complained that wherever they had been taken in the U.S., including where blacks lived, they never really got to see the community. They were always being steered to schools and churches, and not to places that revealed something about the lives of the ordinary people there. In California, they attended genteel garden parties. They wanted to make contact with real people. Even if they didn't understand English that well, they wanted to try to communicate with the people on the streets without a translator.

There was a street program going on at 114th Street: the World's Worst Fair. It was exactly opposite the

extravaganza-filled World's Fair in Flushing, across the river. The Japanese writers were taken there and shown tenements with ceilings falling, and windows broken, and toilets clogged, and garbage that hadn't been picked up in days. They saw some *real life*.

At our place, where the reception was scheduled, we finally told the Japanese that the people they wanted to meet weren't coming. In April, Malcolm had made the statement that he was going to leave the Nation of Islam and there had been threats on his life. Word was going around that he would be killed by the end of May, and we were into June. People had said he wouldn't take a chance coming to a place where he didn't know anyone.

Anyway the place was jammed. The Japanese said they'd meet the people who did come—black leaders and civil rights workers—and be as polite as they could be, and leave. But just as the program was about to begin and everybody was seated, we got this knock at the door and there was Malcolm. "I know what you are going to say," he said, "I didn't write to you. I'll make up for it."

He came in and saw this packed house and went around to every single person, black, white, Asian, and shook hands with everyone, asking their names. He practically electrified the rooms. Then the program began.

Edwardina Brown, who was a teacher at the Harlem Freedom School, read aloud a letter she had just received from the students of the University of Ghana. It was a three-page typewritten letter in which the students were telling her about the impact Malcolm made on them. I think Malcolm himself was thrilled by the letter. Then Clebert Ford sang Askia Muhammad Touré's *Cry Freedom*—there is one part in it that mentions Malcolm and when he came to it, he sort of graciously nodded to him and Malcolm nodded back. After that, it was as if everyone had spontaneously agreed to end the program there and listen to what Malcolm had to say. And the Japanese said they wanted to hear Malcolm without interpreters.

He spoke that afternoon about Asian history: about feudalism, and colonialism, and the character of government, and the importance of a people's culture. This was 1964, and the Vietnam war was on, although there

never pay the rent to open up a store. Garvey's idea was to put it on the street and 116th Street became its showcase.

After the Freedom School closed, I went to Malcolm's Liberation School. I don't think the concept of Third World people was familiar to me until then. What we went through during the war years certainly should have made me think about what happens to people of color: the government didn't intern the Italians or the Germans. Something inside me was always telling me: Look at who you are. You're a person of color. This is the kind of treatment you're going to get. But because I didn't have that much of an opportunity to meet aware blacks, or politically progressive people, I didn't reflect long on those things.

So learning about black history was tremendously eye-opening and mind-boggling. I started to become more inquisitive. Studying black history showed me much more of the inequities of this social system than I had ever realized existed.

But one doesn't learn just by reading a few books and attending a few lectures. Many I consider my best teachers were just ordinary folks of all ages, from the elderly to young street bloods, and many from behind prison walls. The most powerful writing and poetry came from prison inmates.

It was especially eye-opening reading the speeches of Frederick Douglass. I can't think of any white writers who could touch Douglass for the sheer power of his language. And then to find out that there were people whose names had hardly surfaced, nationalists like Delaney, who was right under Douglass on the *North Star*, the newspaper they ran. And hearing Malcolm define nationalism, going to his rallies at the Audubon Ballroom every Sunday, it was an education in itself. The more times passes, the more phenomenal Malcolm's accomplishments seem to me.

After Malcolm, Leroi Jones—Amira Baraka—brought his group to Harlem; that was around 1966. He held a parade through the streets of Harlem, a very colorful parade with African drums and stuff, passing out leaflets and letting people know that he was opening this school and that everybody was welcome.

I had met Baraka a couple of times when he helped Harlem Freedom School raise money. There were a lot of black people in and around the theater who raised money for Harlem Freedom School and other black groups, and Baraka was one of the most in-demand performers with his poetry. So I knew a little bit about him when he came in and I enrolled.

The school was in a brownstone on 131st Street, between Lenox and Seventh Avenue, and in a short while, it became so well-known that black literary people and artists from all over the country came to Harlem to check it out. It was the first kind of institution that upset a lot of people, and certainly it upset whites, because the idea was that it was open only to blacks, or nonwhites. Harlem Freedom School was integrated and most everything else that was political in Harlem was integrated, until this new kind of nationalism emerged. Even a lot of whites who had been in the civil rights movement were upset by it.

For me, the big difference between Baraka's school and the ones that had preceded it was a class taught by Harold Cruise, who wrote *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. His course encompassed four aspects of...struggle, I guess you call it: the history of revolution, the roots of black nationalism, Western political philosophy, and marxism through black eyes.

I'm glad I had gone to those other schools because it made me a little more prepared, but I wasn't really prepared for Cruise; I hadn't done enough reading. The long and short of it is that the 1960s had turned me on; it was a period of education for me. Or I should say a period of new education. I was running through these things and trying to raise kids at the same time, and the kids were wonderful. But I still couldn't keep up with the heavy reading, and I didn't know enough about leftist thinking.

Cruise was just so far ahead. In fact, most of the people in the class were somewhat like me. I don't think that anyone had done that much reading on the subject; it was sort of new to most of us. It was probably unfair to Cruise to have students who weren't quite prepared for all that he wanted us to absorb. The school was a fiasco in the end.

It ended up in shootings. One writer was shot. I don't

know how many others were shot. That got all of us really scared. People were getting beaten up, or stabbed, and then, at the end, the police came in and closed the place down. There was so much violence there that I can't help feeling that it was organized to destroy the place.

Cruise felt so badly that the school was destroyed like that that he continued his course in his apartment on 14th Street. That's when we found out that one of the people in the school right from the beginning—he even came down to 14th Street—was an FBI agent; he was the one who became so close to all of us. He even played on my husband's softball team.

Right during that period, too, the first Black Panther Party was created. Even before the West Coast Black Panther Party, there was a Black Panther Party here, and almost every black activist in Harlem had joined it. Practically all of the people in Baraka's school was a part of the Black Panther Party of Harlem. It was led by a young theoretician and follower of Malcolm's, Max Stanford, and it lasted about a year. Then it was smashed by the police.

5

Do you remember the case called the Queens 17? Seventeen blacks were busted in one of those early morning raids. I think the two people the police really wanted to get were Stanford and Herman Ferguson, who was an assistant principal—the first black assistant principal—of a public school. Anyway, there were 17, and most of them were not the regular run of people who usually get busted. It was the first time that the police rounded up a group of intellectuals. Everybody in that group was a college graduate, or if they weren't college graduates they were studying for degrees. It was the first time that a school principal was indicted. The rest were school teachers, social workers, writers, and other professionals.

The police filed several charges. Once was for attempted murder. Another charge was conspiracy. The police said

the group had conspired to attempt the assassination of Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the Urban League. They claimed to have found a store of weapons.

It was a significant bust because the police used it to destroy the Panthers in Harlem. The Party had a broad outreach; it was still growing. At the time, there was only this one, large, militant, grass-roots organization. They were trying to get black principals in Harlem and in Bedford-Stuyvesant. There had been demonstrations at quite a few schools.

Jessie Gray was a big name at the time and the Black Panther Party worked with his organization to clean up 114th and 115th Streets. Gray was fighting for better housing and cleaning up dilapidated buildings. A lot of places didn't have even running water because the plumbing was so bad. He was organizing "back-street" youth. They were trying to fix the ceilings of people's apartments; they were trying to get the garbage taken out of the area; very basic kinds of things that other people take for granted. Police brutality was another issue. That was one of the issues that the Black Panther Party in Harlem marched about over and over again. From 1963 on, there was a lot of police brutality.

Actually there were so many things happening in the mid-1960s that it is difficult to keep the dates straight without referring to newspaper clippings. For three summers, from 1966 to 1968, all the major cities burned. And in 1968 Martin Luther King was killed. That was the year 500 black nationalists met in Detroit; that discussion was the basis of Malcolm's concept of nationhood and nationalism. From 1965 to 1969 the U.S. government was actually afraid that a revolutionary period was brewing. They worked hard to neutralize any black organization and to discredit black leaders.

6

We had very little money at the time—I worked part-time in different restaurants and Bill was with the Japan International Christian University Foundation, where he was always meeting interesting people and students—but we were so busy raising the kids and being with other people, I hardly noticed.

Actually our life was a lot of students coming through our house. And then, too, there were so many young mothers and their children who had nowhere to go. I can't even name how many little ones we took care of through the years, and young mothers and children who stayed with us. We had lots of kids ourselves, but we felt we could always manage if we wanted, just by stretching things. And friends would drop off \$5 or \$10, or food, to help out.

It was quite an education in cooperative living: Our children met all kinds of people. We learned from everyone. There was one young boy who stayed with us a short while whose memory I cherish. His name was Michael Hernandez and he was from California. Someone from the Peace Corps who had been at one of the Saturday night open houses remembered us and mentioned our names to some Chicano school teachers, who wrote to us and asked us if we would take in a young Chicano boy who had Hodgkin's Disease. When school had opened that September, the doctors called Michael's teacher and said they didn't think he could go back to school because he was in the last phase of his illness. They gave him six months to live.

No one exactly told Michael the little time the doctors thought he had, but the boy seemed to know that he was going downhill and when they asked him, if he had a wish, what he would want to do, he said he wanted to go to New York. He was an artist and he wanted to see the galleries and meet the artists.

He was the same age as our son, Billy, and the two developed a beautiful friendship. He lived with us for a couple of weeks and after he left he sent us a dozen roses and a note with just the words: Shakespeare's 29th sonnet. We turned to the sonnet and quietly read:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
 I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
 And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
 Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
 Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
 With what I most enjoy contented least;
 Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee,—and then my state,
 Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
 For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
 That I scorn to change my state with kings.

7

The Asian-American movement began in 1969. It started with Kazu Iizima, Mary Ikeda, and Min Masuda, three Niseis from California. They had been activists from the late 1930s: young college students in California, and very progressive. They were way ahead of everybody.

During the war, from 1942 to 1945, they were in a group in New York called Japanese-American Committee for Democracy, which opposed Japanese militarism. They probably had to phase out during the McCarthy period. New York had a lot of Asian leftists and some of them were taken in and harrassed.

The McCarthy period was a harrowing experience for those who were active then. They went into other activities, but nothing showed much promise of developing until the late 1960s. On the other hand, I'm meeting Asian-Americans now who were in the civil rights movement. Not too long ago at a conference at Hunter College, for example, I heard a speaker named Eleanor Wong Telemac. She wrote a book called, "It's Crazy To Be Chinese in Minnesota." A dynamic woman. She was in Mississippi and Tennessee in the mid-1960s, registering voters. There were

others.

When groups in the universities pushed for and organized ethnic studies, those of us who were older and out of school were just questioning things on an individual basis. Then Min and Kazu casually discussed the possibilities of an Asian-American movement, and it began, in New York. Asian-Americans for Action became the first group outside of the college campus.

Kozu, Mary, and Min met three people from Chinatown, Don Yee, Yu Man Chan, and Yu Han Chan, and they began organizing people from Chinatown and the Japanese people they knew on the West Side. People passed the word around; that's how I heard about it. I think we were at a demonstration. Every time we saw another Asian in a demonstration, we would go over and talk to them.

We felt that Asians had to speak out against the bombing of Vietnam. All of us made a special effort to get the churches involved, which was difficult. Some ministers, like Alfred Akamatsu, did speak out on several occasions, from a moral rather than a political position. But they were way ahead of their congregations and the more outspoken they became, the more uneasy their congregations felt.

Every time we went to any kind of antiwar rally or march, we'd be on the lookout for Asians to march with as a group. When we started, we got maybe 20 people together. Then 40 and 60 and 80 and 100. By the time we had gone into the '70s and marching in New York, the Asian-American contingent would be 200 strong. It was exciting to see the number grow. Our largest contingent was 400. That was in Washington D.C. We organized continuous teach-ins and workshops about the various aspects of the war.

We marched under the banner of Asian Coalition, and through our banners and placards we projected an Asian viewpoint. We took the stand of Asians against the war in Indochina; that Indochina was Asian land; that Asians were being massacred in an illegal, immoral, racist, and undeclared war; that it violated the sovereignty and the right to self-determination of the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian peoples. The entire American people were suffering from the war. We stated our unity as one group,

linking up the struggle of all the American peoples to end the war.

One of the best political minds in the Asian movement had moved to New York from California at that time—Floyd Huen, who had been teaching Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. He, and his wife, Jean Quan, were indispensable in organizing and setting up the educationals.

But going back to Asian Americans for Action, the young people in AAA felt there should be an organization in an Asian community. Chinatown was the only Asian community. The young Chinese activists in Chinatown were already thinking about organizing, and came up with the name—I Wor Kuen, which was the name of a group in China that challenged the British and other foreigners during the Boxer Rebellion. IWK was the Asian equivalent of the Black Panthers and Young Lords in militancy, in politics, in grass-roots organizing, and even in choice of apparel (black leather jackets and beret). In fact, they were more outwardly left in that they publicly acknowledged their communism. Their audacious stance attracted the attention and harassment of the reactionaries in Chinatown, and won the admiration of the most progressive forces. IWK was probably the only Asian organization that engaged in a good working rapport with other minority groups, especially blacks and Puerto Ricans.

Asian-Americans for Action was left mostly with older people like myself. However, AAA's broad outreach and participation in almost every issue of that period made an impact in the Asian-American movement as a whole. Also in the early 1970s, an Asian-American Community Center was established in midtown and sustained itself for 4-1/2 years without grants or funding. It was an herculean effort continuously raising rent money through a variety of community programs and benefits. My husband was part of this group, as was Kazu Iijima's husband, Tak. It was where all the Asian ethnic organizations met, including an American Indian group.

Other Asian-American groups of that period were: Asian-Americans for Fair Media, Asians in the Spirit of the Indochinese, Asian Women's Group, Group of Khmer

Residents in America, Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino, Worker's Viewpoint, Japanese-American Help for the Aging, Vietnamese Student Association, Union of Democratic Thais, and a Korean organization.

The Asian-American movement started to branch out on different levels—social and cultural, as well as political. A lot of it was influenced by what we had seen in the black movement and other ethnic groups. There was an identity crisis. Who were we? Asians felt a need to scrutinize themselves. Does becoming Americanized mean becoming colonized?

Asians also felt the need to work in Asian communities, to interact more with their own people, to learn their own respective Asian histories. I certainly agreed with that. But while I was active in the Asian movement, I was living in Harlem, and getting more deeply involved there. Much was happening in Harlem, both out in the street and at home, that were intertwined.

8

In 1967, Billy, my oldest child, while home from college, was hit by a car and seriously injured. After three years and eight operations, he had to have his leg amputated. This was a turning point for him as well as for the family. At the same time, militant black organizations were being hit by the police department and the F.B.I. Many brothers were taken to jail or had to leave the country. In fact, so many were behind bars on serious charges that much of the work in Harlem became prison support work. I joined the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. Political prisoners became our priority. The work entailed keeping in communication with them, visiting them in prison, and attending court trials. Luckily, my husband had a steady job then, and was quite magnanimous about my activities. Billy, too, seemed adjusted as an amputee, and although he still had no prosthesis, he wanted to be on his own.

At college, in Massachusetts, he was more in proximity with whites; he was not involved in the Asian-American movement. When he would come home, he would hear about its development across the country. He would become curious, but he kept his distance. I think the period was difficult for both him and his woman, who was white. Ethnic pressures on mixed couples were sometimes unpleasant and often unfair. His choice of a companion seemed ideal; a woman who was warm, sensitive, introspective.

In 1973, after they were married, Billy and his wife went to live in New Mexico to get a new start in life. They seemed so happy when they left; though there might have been misgivings from both sides. A year later they split. The reasons would be too intricate and private. A part of it could have been Billy's addiction to Darvon and its effects; psychological and emotional problems; latent or dormant changes; also the questionable amount of drugs he was taking. Neither he nor his wife even mentioned their impending decision to separate. Shortly after, we received a disturbing phone call from his wife that Billy was in the hospital; that he had been burned in a fire. My greatest regret is that I could not rush out to see him in New Mexico when this fire took place. I was under a grand jury subpoena and could not leave the state. My husband flew right out to be with him, and then brought him back.

He entered a psychiatric treatment program, which he attended each day for about four months. He even cold-turkeyed the Darvon. Then, in the fall, the hospital told him it wasn't necessary for him to continue; that he wasn't that ill. They said that all he needed was a job. We were quite surprised knowing that he was undergoing deep internal agitations. We felt he needed more time, more rest, more psychiatric help. The pressure of finding a job was taking its toll. Changes were taking place within him which we couldn't really finger, couldn't understand. He would become agitated, frustrated, depressed. It was agonizing not to know how to help.

The day after he was released from the program, he didn't come home. A young couple who was visiting us offered to look for him. We suggested the Staten Island

Ferry as Billy used to go there when he was down. The couple came back after midnight. By then we had called every hospital, every close friend, and every police station and no one had heard of or seen him. Our two friends finally revealed that the ferryboat employees had found a pair of crutches on one of the boats and their description of the pair of crutches—that it was recently burned in a fire—fit Billy's pair.

We called the Bureau of Missing Persons and asked the Coast Guard to send out helicopters and also to drag the harbor. The following day we found a note in Billy's room to the family. It was to say goodbye, a heartrending farewell which each member of our family will never forget, for intermingled with frustrations, desperation, and anguish of his plight was a love that no mortal death could ever destroy. On the sixth day, they found his body at a pier in Brooklyn. The agony of grief was almost unbearable. Even today, sorrow prevails. But we paid Billy homage for his act of courage.

9

A couple of years ago, I attended an Asian-American conference in California. Mostly I went there to listen to Karl Yoneda, the union leader from the San Francisco Bay area, and Koji Ariyoshi, a leader of the longshoremen's union in Hawaii before WWII. Even though the government hounded him for being a communist, Ariyoshi was sent by our State Department to China during the war to make contact with Mao Tse-Tung, who was also fighting against Japan. I wanted to know more about Asian-Americans who had contributed to progressive causes. While we went to school we never heard of these people. They were totally buried or blocked out of American history.

When I arrived, someone mentioned a woman who this person thought I would like to meet. She was an Isei woman of my mother's generation, a Japanese socialist at

age 16, when she first came to this country at the turn of the century.

Japanese socialists, feminists, when Japanese immigrants were coming here? Well, I was told, it's just become known. She was a poet and had done a lot of writing, only it was in Japanese and no one had ever translated it.

A few minutes later, a lot of Iseis started arriving and passing the office where I was talking, going down the hall, and one of the young people there said, "hey, there she goes." I said, "goes who?" And he said, "that's the woman we were talking about." And I said, "what's her name?"

"Fujikawa."

"Fujikawa? That's strange; we were friendly with a family named Fujikawa. It couldn't be her. Where is she from?"

"Long Beach."

"The friend I know is from Long Beach."

"Why don't you follow her and see if it's her?"

I ran down the hallway: Mrs. Fujikawa, Mrs. Fujikawa!

The woman stopped and turned around and I introduced myself; I didn't expect her to remember me. It had been 40 years since we last saw each other. I said, "I'm Mrs. Nakahara's daughter." She was so surprised. We embraced and I totally forgot about her being this woman the others were talking about.

When I came back to where the others were, they asked, "Well, did you find Mrs. Fujikawa?" And I said I found an old family friend whose name is Fujikawa. Mrs. Fujikawa was my mother's oldest friend and the first person who befriended her when she came to America. She used to give my mother English lessons. They lived on Terminal Island. I never knew her as anything special.

Well, they said, there is only one Fujikawa here. I couldn't believe it.

The meetings were so hectic that we never made contact again. Later I wrote to her, but she never answered. When I went out to California again, I tried to look her up. She had died, and no one seemed to know what had happened to her manuscripts because her husband had died the year before.

That was an eye-opening meeting for me. It helped me place myself. I started to see the realities and get to know a little bit more of what has happened in history. It helped me to change.

I don't mean change from one thing to another. I don't think that you're ever limited to just one framework. Not too long ago, I was asked to speak at a conference here in the city and they wanted me to speak as an Asian-American. But I said no. They said, speak as an Asian woman. Again, I said no. When you are fighting injustice, it doesn't matter whether you are a woman or an Asian. Regardless of who or what we are, we should be fighting all the negative things in the society. If you are really moral, you're flexible. Let me speak, I said, as a person.